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ABSTRACT

Although for over 22 years the National Writing Project has been providing methodology for composition instructors, unfortunately pre-service teachers are seldom participants in the Writing Project experience. The need is great for writing pedagogy that truly prepares future teachers to evaluate and respond to writing. Writing partnerships can provide this "real world" experience for future teachers of English. The pedagogy of partnerships empowers pre-service teachers as it creates dialogue between academically older and younger students; the pairing of students across course levels provides for a unique additional audience for both upper and lower level writers. Writing partners are required to meet a minimum of 4 times per semester and each partner is expected to do a journal entry about the session. Reports on partnerships for a percentage of the final grade and a computer folder is set up for each English composition or writing course. One factor accounting for higher retention rates is that first year students experience one-on-one contact with a professor or with someone significantly involved with their academic life. (Contains 4 references.) (CR)

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Mary L. Warner

The Pedagogy of Partnerships: Empowering Pre-Service Teachers for Teaching and Writing

For over twenty-two years the National Writing Project has been providing the most successful methodology for composition instructors: the pragmatic gifts of teachers teaching other teachers. Unfortunately a vital segment of those various groups involved in the process of teaching and writing--the pre-service teachers--are seldom participants in the Writing Project experience. In addition, pre-service teachers have only recently begun to benefit from the recognition of the need for methods course work in composition. Particularly in colleges and smaller state universities which service most of the English education majors, the great need is for writing pedagogy that truly prepares future teachers to evaluate and respond to writing.

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> One thing I realized very quickly when I began student teaching was the lack of "real world" applications in my teacher education program. Many of my classmates often did not see the relevancy of what we were learning; I felt the same at times. But when I became the teacher, it didn't take me long to realize that my eighth grade students were no different; they needed real world application as well.
>
> My best experience in college with the real world of teaching English came not from a sophomore or junior field experience, but from the Writing Partners project. Working with a real student for an extended period of time truly showed me the difficulty of correcting writing--especially when the writer believes the piece is good. There is no comparison between working with a real student and studying what it will be like to work with students. Most education classes tell what you will experience as a teacher; the Writing Partners project allows you to be the teacher and gain the experience firsthand. (Debby Christensen, May, 1995)

These words of a student taking Composition for the English Teacher, a 300-level course for English Education majors, during the semester I initiated the idea of writing partners signal some of its significant advantages. Particularly for institutions with

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Teacher Education programs, Writing Partnerships can provide this "real world" experience for future teachers of English while simultaneously addressing some other issues facing the English faculty and the institution as a whole: the paper load, opportunities for one-on-one student conferencing, emphasis on writing as a process integrated with the development of critical thinking skills, and retention. The primary focus of this article is the significant contributions of the Writing Partners project to English Education programs.

The pedagogy of partnerships empowers pre-service teachers as it creates dialogue between academically older and younger students; the pairing of students across course levels provides for a unique additional audience for both the upper level and lower level writers. The distinction between writing partnerships across course levels and peer tutors or partners from within the same course is that the range of course levels provides an audience, the pre-service teachers, who should work from the dual perspective of student writer and future teacher of writing. The distinct advantage for pre-service writing teachers is the realistic picture of the preparedness or under preparedness of the first year students. A student in Grammar for Writing expressed the following:

> It really forces you to face what you know (and don't know) and more importantly, how to take the information you do know and relate it to someone who is struggling with it. For me, it really put into perspective all that I know about writing and grammar and how important it is. When writing comes easy to you and you've always been able to put together ideas clearly in your writing, you don't realize how important that is. Then you meet with someone who is maybe struggling, and you read their paper and are completely lost at what they are trying to say and how to help them, and then you have to go back to all you know and try to figure out how you're going to start teaching it to them. It forced me to know my writing rules and style even better. Hopefully then, my writing partner learned and so did I. I thought it was <u>great</u>!

The quotation above obviously has some technical problems of its own, yet the writer's attempt at metacognition replicates the well-known adage that we learn material best as we attempt to teach it to others.

The structure of the partnerships is fairly straightforward. Students in English 101 and 102 are paired with students in courses like 300 level methods courses such as Composition for the English Teacher, Fundamentals of Teaching Composition, Grammar for the English Teacher or as is the case at Western Carolina University, in Grammar for Writing. As instructor in both courses, I have had writing samples or diagnostic essays offering some indication of student ability and can form the partnerships on the basis of these samples. Another method of pairing results from brief descriptions of the upper level students allowing the younger undergraduates to select someone who matches their writing concerns.

Writing partners are required to meet a minimum of four times per semester; the most successful partnerships have generally been those who meet more frequently. The number of meetings corresponds with the number of papers assigned in the semester since ideally, having four sessions allows for the freshman composition students to have additional input on each of their first drafts, beyond what the instructor can give or their classmates can give through writing workshops, . In the writing process, which teachers of writing struggle with nearly as much as their students, we learn best as we continue to write. That premise is the rationale for the writing required of students in both the composition for teachers courses and in the various upper level grammar courses. It also means that the academically older partner has some writing to be reviewed by or shared with the student in lower level composition courses.

"Debbie, my writing partner, also helped in revision. She pointed out some good ideas for my weak areas and the strong ones. After reading some of her writing, I take her advice seriously. I personally think she could be a published writer in the future." Darin's comments here demonstrate how the academically younger student can be inspired by the

writing of the academically older student; his words also show something of the way he was validated as a writer by having Debbie let him serve as an audience for her. From the academically older student's viewpoint, Rose Jagim shared these insights. "I consider him my writing partner in every literal sense of the word 'partner.' I don't consider myself a better writer than he is, although we have different strengths, weaknesses and styles."

Each partner is expected to do a journal entry about the session describing what was accomplished. Students in 101/102 are also encouraged to reflect on the help they received from their writing partners as these academically younger students prepare the self-assessment which accompanies each final draft submitted. The assessment or monitoring of the writing partnerships comes from students' journals, their self-assessments, student comments throughout the semester, and a final course evaluation; students are not required to sign their names on the final course evaluation, thus those comments are cited here only as "student comments." The appendix includes a more comprehensive set of student commentary. Obviously, given most of the evaluation is based on student comment and response, it would appear that there is a lack of "hard data" verifying the value of writing partnerships. Yet much of what the writing partnerships provide cannot be measured in statistics. The notion of mentor ships developing from the writing partnerships and the effect this has on retention, is one such area.

Reports on the partnerships form a percentage of the final grade though some considerations do need to be made. The two universities where I have implemented the writing partnerships do have large numbers of commuters, and logistics does present a challenge. In evaluation, acknowledging that logistics and/ individual student problems can affect the success of the partnerships, I frequently simply ask about the importance of the idea of partnering. Once again, most response from the six semesters of experimenting with writing partnerships across course levels has affirmed the value of the concept.

The question of logistics, whether it is actually impossible for students to meet with each other, has been reduced at Western Carolina University because of the technology

available. Here a computer folder, known as the Share Folder, is set up for each English composition or writing course. Partners from both courses can put their papers in the Share files of the particular courses, and these papers can be accessed for response. This semester the English 102 meets in a computer classroom twice weekly; the Fundamentals of Composition course is scheduled for a computer classroom for all class meetings, so students in both classes have weekly access to the Share file during class time. The Share file makes the process of total class workshopping much more efficient also since papers can brought up on each student's computer as well as be projected on a screen.

The ideal situation for discussion of writing is the face-to-face context. It has also become apparent that the best partnerships result when the upper level students are in courses such as Fundamentals of Teaching Composition where they have the opportunity to become totally immersed in the writing process and are given the language, the empowerment, to reflect on their own writing process as well as that of students. In their "Peer Tutoring as Response," Ann Matsuhashi, Alice Gillam, Rance Conley and Beverly Moss have emphasized that "peer talk about writing is more than a helpful pedagogical technique; it is essential to writing" (298). In the case of partnerships across course levels, that talk about writing is enriched by the difference in writing tasks and the power of metacognition that comes from learning methods of assessment and evaluation. Matsuhashi et al discuss the growth over time of peer tutors in linguistic, cognitive and contextual terms (302); pre-service teachers experience this same kind of growth through partnerships with writers on lower levels, and the future writing teachers then bring this growth to their teaching contexts.

The following case study description, which was submitted in addition to his journal entries, demonstrates the range of topics that pre-service writing teachers can comprehend.

> I met with Kevin yesterday, major disappointment. Kevin had written about a page and a half of his second assignment and still just rambled on with no real focus. He

did, however, stumble on some really interesting possibilities. The fact that he didn't recognize them makes them worthless to him; I, however, have a couple of really good ideas if I am ever stuck with an assignment.

I see the problem this way. It is difficult to write when there is not only no interest in the topic, but no interest in the task of writing, period. I have never found a teacher that could make a writing assignment interesting until I found pleasure in the task; even then, to actually sit down and start writing is still very difficult. I understand exactly how Kevin feels. Still he needs to learn these skills, and in his case, quickly.

For the sake of discussion, let us assume the Kevins of the world will never be convinced that the word "smithing" is a pleasant undertaking; let us also assume, they will never be ardent readers. What are the reasonable minimum requirements for such a person in the field of writing? Then how do we teach the minimum?

I have worked in the technological field for quite a few years and, to be honest, to be able to write was not really a requirement; that is, in most instances, verbal communication was enough. The writing I did need often did not require full sentences or any punctuation, just a few loose descriptions of what I did at the time.

Let me say here that Kevin should have come out of high school with better skills that he has, but that cannot be undone now.

Three good paragraphs, minimum requirement: Thesis/ introduction, support/elaboration, conclusion/summary. Three paragraphs is short enough so the task is not so daunting that it defeats the student before he starts. When we look at a novel, one page is no big deal, but filling that page, one little letter at a time, is a skill not easily acquired.

I realize schools start out at the simple and progress to the more complex, but, it is also clear that too many students start college unable to write even three good paragraphs. I suspect one of the prime reasons for this is teachers with sixty

to a hundred or more students. In the assembly line model of school, which our system is, and may be of necessity, quality control will be limited by what a single teacher can reasonably be expected to do well.

If three good paragraphs is the minimum, then how to get them is the next question. Again, from my own experience, suggestions on a topics, from a teacher, when one is not interested in writing at all, no matter how broad, do not really help inspire the student. Better either limited topics, or, and I believe preferably, topics directly related to subjects the student has in other classes. Even to the extent that one paper be allowed to fill the requirement for two classes. Three good paragraphs on a history lesson could illustrate to the history or literature teacher that the assignment was read and understood. One teacher could grade content, the other, the mechanics.

Kevin, being the first student I've ever had, worries me. I see a little of myself in him when I was his age. There is no real direction there, but, there is sufficient ability to become many things if the task of education does not discourage him.

(Neil Schanzenbach, October 13, 1994)

Neil met with Kevin for a half hour weekly throughout the semester; this partnership clearly went beyond the requirement, and Neil offered a particular kind of insight, as his comment indicate, which not all partnerships had. Though his commentary is more rumination than expression of or application of theory, it highlights the advantages of writing partnerships for the pre-service teacher. He is able to ask questions, probe the same problems any teacher of writing experiences, but he and other pre-service teachers are allowed "real life" situations in the course of their study. The questions Neil asks can easily become topics of discussion in 300 level methods of teaching composition courses since his experience is not unique--nor are Kevin's writing problems unique.

At Western Carolina University, the Model Clinical Teaching Program has allowed the students in Fundamentals of Teaching Composition to have an extension of the experience coming from partnering with college freshmen. The Model Clinical Teaching Program

provides experienced public school teachers to team teach with the university instructor in methods courses. In my Fundamentals of Teaching Composition course, including students preparing for teaching any grade from kindergarten through high school, Dee Grantham, a high school English teacher, partners with me. Interestingly enough, our class also has a person who has been a lecturer in Western's freshman composition program who is seeking high school certification. This student is concurrently teaching four sections of English 101 and 102 and clearly brings a perspective on freshman English students; now he and his classmates are discovering what others, who have partnered with high school or middle school students, have learned.

The value of having model clinical teachers like Dee is that it provides yet another kind of partnering. Her high school semester began one week earlier than the university's. In our first session of Fundamentals of Teaching Composition, we were able to read and review the four part "get to know you" essays her sophomores had written. Each student in Fundamentals responded to a specific student in the high school course. In another session, previous to the literary analysis paper assignment and workshopping, the Fundamentals' students had the opportunity to practice what they had learned about holistic scoring as they evaluated the high school students' literary essay on Oedipus as a tragic hero.

North Carolina public school students in grades four, eight, and ten write state-evaluated essays; the prompt for each grade's exam is the same statewide. Because of the teaching partnership which the Model Clinical Program has allowed, all the pre-service teachers in Fundamentals of Teaching Composition are becoming familiar with the creation of writing prompts and rubrics, with holistic scoring, and with the inherent challenges of preparing students for writing these exams. They are also learning the "discourse of response" and the difficulty of assessment. Further, because of the computer classroom, my pre-service teachers can provide word processed response for their high school partners,

and in the process are learning some of the technology needed to meet the computer competencies mandated by the state for pre-service teachers.

In Richard Beach's essay, "Showing Students How to Assess: Demonstrating Techniques for Response in the Writing Conference," he has emphasized that students need to know how to assess writing, primarily their own. Beach asserts that until teachers model methodologies, students will not acquire the language to articulate their responses nor the means to explore revision strategies. As he leads students through individual writing conferences, Beach demonstrates three stages of assessing: describing, judging, and selecting appropriate revisions (131). The Writing Partners projects that pair first year composition students with methods students, or high school or middle school students with pre-service teachers build on the modeling done by composition teachers in courses such as Fundamentals of Teaching Composition. This evaluation and response experience creates new discourse communities of academically younger students with soon-to-be teachers who are empowered by the abilities of representation, communication and reflection.

It is also highly probable, however, that even future teachers of English will not be attuned to all the advantages of serving as writing partners. Those like Debby, whose reactions are cited at the beginning of this article, do see in time, and as in her case, fairly quickly, how important it is to have more and more "live" writing/writer contexts. Pre-service teachers are not significantly different from seasoned ones; the most common response I have heard from student teachers as I asked about their preparation has been, "No one ever told me how much time it would take to grade." Implied in this statement frequently is a larger concern, "No one taught me how to respond to writing" or "No one prepared me for the kinds of writing I would get from students." Paraphrasing a notion of Bill Schulz, writing teacher at Rapid City Stevens High School, that we need to view our students as writers who happen to be students, Writing Partnerships provide writers who happen to be preparing to teach, the ability to work with writers who happen to be students.

Some students, more from the first year writing courses, may question the requirement of meeting with writing partners. As with many other situations, without the requirement, the meetings might not happen. Comments from 101 students do verify that some see the value of the project. "It was hard to get together sometimes, but she gave me a lot of help and yet didn't totally cut it down. I think you should keep up with this idea. I know it has improved my writing skills lots!" "I think the writing partner plan is a good idea; it gives you yet another chance to confer with someone on your paper." "There are many advantages in having a writing partner; it's someone to keep you on the right track." (101 students, Fall 1994)

The notion of retention was mentioned earlier in this paper. Many institutions of higher education have open enrollment policies and a fairly significant population of students who are under prepared for some reason. One critical factor that accounts for higher retention rates is that first year students experience one-on-one contact with a professor or with someone significantly involved in their academic life. Several instances from the partnerships established during Fall 1994 highlight the retention value. In one case, Laurie, a first year student, experienced a family emergency. She was supposed to have a draft of her 101 paper edited in class and was unable to get the draft in. Laurie called her writing partner, who was able to supply a draft and verify with me, Laurie's instructor, why Laurie would not be in class. In this instance, Laurie had identified in her writing partner, an academic and personal support.

Another first year student described her partner this way, My partner helped more than I ever imagined she could. I think we built a small friendship from this class...I have a good experience with her and although she helped me more than I helped her, I hope she too, had a good time." One additional aspect of the partnerships that is connected to retention is that they help extend the option for one-on-one conferencing which can become impossible as class sizes increase and as university professors face larger teaching loads. Above all, the hope of writing partnerships is that the future teachers of writing by

becoming more involved in their own writing and the writing of others with whom they partner, will grow in the perception of writing as a means of lifelong learning.

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Students from Black Hills State University, Spearfish, SD, Fall 1994, Spring and Fall 1995, and Spring 1996 in Composition for the English Teacher and Grammar for the English Teacher.

Students from Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC, Fall 1996 in Grammar for Writing, and Spring 1997 in Fundamentals of Teaching Composition.